

Broadband & Rural America Architects of the Digital Future

NATIONAL RURAL ASSEMBLY CAMPAIGNS: BROADBAND

Rural areas are more likely to lack broadband access than the rest of the nation. That means rural residents are missing out on opportunities for education, telemedicine, economic development, and civic participation. As a result, rural America – and our nation – is in danger of falling further behind. We need broadband policies that acknowledge high-speed Internet access as a necessity. In order to succeed, all communities must participate in our digital future.

According to the Federal Communications Commission 8th Broadband Progress Report, fixed broadband networks do not reach 19 million Americans. 14.5 million of those residents live in rural and nearly a third in Tribal lands.

In order to close the digital divide, federal and state policies must support efforts that protect consumers, prioritize public safety, encourage innovation, increase competition, and invest in rural communities.

CHALLENGES IN RURAL AMERICA

Rural communities face unique challenges in obtaining broadband service – access, deployment, and affordability.

Rural areas are by definition geographically dispersed, making delivery of services more challenging and expensive. This has served as an excuse for telecommunications corporations to deny extending broadband infrastructure to rural. Without this investment, rural communities are underserved or do not have Internet access.

In rural areas, lack of competition can also make broadband unaffordable, unreliable, and substandard. When a single provider serves an area, consumers lack options for affordable prices and quality service in difficult-to-reach areas.

Because rural communities have less access to the Internet, the space it creates for social, cultural, economic, political, and democratic participation leaves rural people out, and rural communities cannot use the Internet as a valuable tool to communicate.

RURAL BROADBAND PRINCIPLES

Any discussion of broadband and Internet policy for rural communities should begin here:

1. **Communication is a human right.**

The United Nations recently declared Internet Access a Human Right. Lack of broadband denies rural areas the right to communicate. Without broadband, rural communities are further isolated from economic and civic participation. Broadband is no longer a luxury but a vital service necessary to participate fully in our nation's democracy, economy, culture, and society.

2. **Rural America is diverse.**

Rural America is diverse in terrains, cultures, peoples, and knowledge. There is no one-size-fits-all broadband solution for connecting rural communities. Therefore, the diversity of rural America must be at the forefront of broadband policies

- Policies should support diverse technologies, encourage local participation in the development of networks, use adequate data collection methods, and respect the unique vision of each rural community for its digital future.

3. **Local ownership and investment in community is the priority.**

Local ownership of broadband infrastructure and service can address access, affordability, deployment, limited provider choice, digital literacy, and data collection problems ignored by absentee telecommunications corporations. Policies that prioritize local ownership invest in the success of communities. When rural communities own their communications infrastructure, they boost the local economy, create jobs, and are held accountable to make broadband accessible to every resident.

4. **Network neutrality and open access are vital.**

Rural areas generally have less access to all forms of media, not just broadband. Therefore full and unfiltered access to all information online is vitally important for rural communities. Democratic action, innovation, and basic liberty demand no less.

Building Our Digital Future

As initiatives to close the digital divide are designed and implemented, the Federal Communications Commission, state, and local representatives must include rural voices in policy conversations. Rural communities are consumers and providers of Internet service, producers of content, and architects of the digital future.

- Efforts to increase national access and deployment should reflect the concerns, interests, and vision of rural communities.
- Rural residents should influence the development of broadband technology in a way that benefits and complements their everyday lives and the future of their communities.

The **Rural Broadband Policy Group** is a growing national coalition of rural broadband advocates. The RBPG has two goals: 1) to articulate broadband policies that create opportunities for rural communities to participate fully in the nation's democracy, economy, culture, and society, and 2) to spark and kindle national collaboration among rural advocates for fast, affordable, and reliable Internet.

For more information about collaborating with the Rural Broadband Policy Group, please contact Edyael Casaperalta: edyael@ruralstrategies.org